



TAKING IT TO THE DECKPLATE

BY CAPT. PAUL S. HAMMER, MC, USN

Operational Stress Control (OSC) training soon will be embedded in all commands. As this transpires, it's important to underscore a key point: OSC is a leadership issue—an ongoing process meant to be folded into our everyday routines.



Junior leaders, especially, have a tremendous influence over the daily lives of Sailors, and it is critical that they understand the responsibilities that OSC requires of them. They must know their Sailors, and they must appreciate the stresses and situations facing their crew.

Senior leaders constantly urge subordinates, "Take care of your people!" But with the crush of daily demands, it's often easier for a leader to deal with the crisis at hand than the subtle problem in the distance. Older and more experienced leaders might be more comfortable in helping Sailors through a personal dilemma or a crisis. They likely have a better appreciation of the rewards of seeing individuals grow through learning to handle problems on their own. But the junior leader can and must acquire these skills. It doesn't have to be difficult.

During a recent OSC awareness presentation, the bos'n of a large ship provided me with a great example. One of his sailors—usually an outgoing and talkative fellow—seemed depressed and distracted as he performed a

key maintenance task. Bos'n told the young man that he seemed terribly down.

The sailor replied that it was the anniversary of a particularly tragic day for him and shared a bit of his burden. Afterward, his demeanor markedly improved, and the bos'n was glad he had inquired.

This leader didn't do psychotherapy, he didn't delve deep into his Sailor's background, and he didn't have to spend hours on the issue. What he did do was show a bit of personal interest in a subordinate. And it made all the difference.

Try this exercise for yourself. Break out the alpha roster for your unit. At each name, ask yourself, "Do I really know this guy? This gal? Is Seaman Smith married? Didn't E-3 Carter's mother just have cancer surgery? Did Harper ever find a new apartment?" Simple, basic information but knowing it helps to show that a leader cares about the military's most important asset—its people—and cares about what is important to them.

Review the roster again, asking yourself what you need to do to help each person be a better Sailor. Then go do it. This is how OSC is a leadership action and a very positive one at that. ■

OUR SINCERE THANKS...

...to the nearly 1,000 military leaders, healthcare providers, researchers and military family members who attended the Navy and Marine Corps Combat & Operational Stress Control Conference 2010. Your participation ensured a vibrant, successful event.

Slide presentations from the conference are available on the NCCOSC website, www.nccosc.navy.mil, and videos of each session are being added. The presentations are a valuable resource for sharing knowledge and improving best practices.

Plans are under way for the 2011 COSC Conference, so please check the NCCOSC website, www.nccosc.navy.mil, for details. We welcome your comments or suggestions at nmcscd.nccosc@med.navy.mil.

SAILORS IN TROUBLE

Dealing with Breakups

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Retired master chief Rob Gerardi well remembers one cruise on a small ship where he counseled a dozen junior Sailors who said they felt suicidal.

"Nine of the 12 involved breakups, all were under 22, and all had been dating for less than six months," recalls Gerardi, who served as an independent duty corpsman and now teaches combat and operational stress control for the Naval Center for Combat & Operational Stress Control (NCCOSC).

Fortunately, none of the Sailors attempted suicide and all were able to complete the deployment. But the experience, Gerardi says, underscores the importance of counseling Sailors on what is one of the biggest sources of stress during a deployment—relationship problems.

Typical scenarios involve young Sailors who are still adjusting to the culture and high operational tempo of Navy life when they develop what they are certain is a serious relationship. They deploy and it's not long before they receive a Dear John or Jane email or call.

"They are completely distraught," Gerardi says. "They do not have the emotional maturity to handle the rejection and they may not have a strong support network that they can count on to keep things in perspective. Their negative emotions snowball and they begin to feel a deep sense of hopelessness."

Isn't this just one of the life lessons that we all have to slog through?

"Sure, it's a normal reaction for this young age, but a Sailor at sea is not in normal situations," says Tom Pickel, a retired Navy corpsman with a subspecialty in neuropsychiatry. "He or she has to be ready at all times to make a life-or-death decision for other Sailors if there is an emergency. You want that person 100 percent functional."

Pickel, who designs educational materials for NCCOSC, emphasizes the



importance of leadership guidance in these common situations.

"It's imperative that leaders counsel young Sailors on common experiences that can derail a Sailor's career or make adjustment to Navy life difficult," he says.

"When told in advance about common problems that happen to young Sailors, people are usually more receptive to the advice you give when the problem occurs."

Gerardi agrees, adding, "A leader should never take for granted that a young Sailor knows the realities of relationships. From day one, you

need to counsel them on the strain that the op tempo puts on them."

How do you counsel a young Sailor who's devastated by a broken relationship?

"You don't brush it off or make fun of Sailors in these situations," says Gerardi. "Take the time to talk to them and remind them that time and space do, in fact, help heal. If you're comfortable doing it, tell them about a similar situation that you faced."

"Equally important is encouraging effective peer-to-peer relationships. Sailors taking care of Sailors is our best weapon for mission accomplishment in a stressful situation." ■

Real Life

From a Blog on Navy Life:

My first marriage was right smack in the middle of pre-deployment workups on a carrier. We got married, I moved her back with me, went underway the next week for 4 days, back for the weekend, underway for 6 weeks. I come back and she had drained down my bank account, bounced several checks including car insurance. She wasn't ready for all that responsibility of me being gone and I wasn't ready to let her be in charge of everything....I was officially divorced 2 years later (although she wanted the divorce, via email, 3 days into a 7 month deployment).

From the “Navy Leader’s Guide for Managing Sailors in Distress”:

There is a tendency among some supervisors and commands not to interfere in a Sailor’s personal life. Experience suggests, however, that relationship problems can quickly interfere with duty performance. Relationship problems have been identified as a significant risk factor associated with suicide in the Navy and Marine Corps.

The leader as Dr. Phil? Dr. Laura? Isn’t that asking a bit much of the job?

“It’s not so much a leader’s job to interfere in personal matters as it is a job of being aware of what’s going on in a Sailor or Marine’s life,” says Tom Pickel, who designs suicide-prevention materials at the Naval Center for Combat & Operational Stress Control. He also is a retired Navy corpsman with a specialty in neuropsychology and has counseled scores of Sailors with marriage or relationship problems.

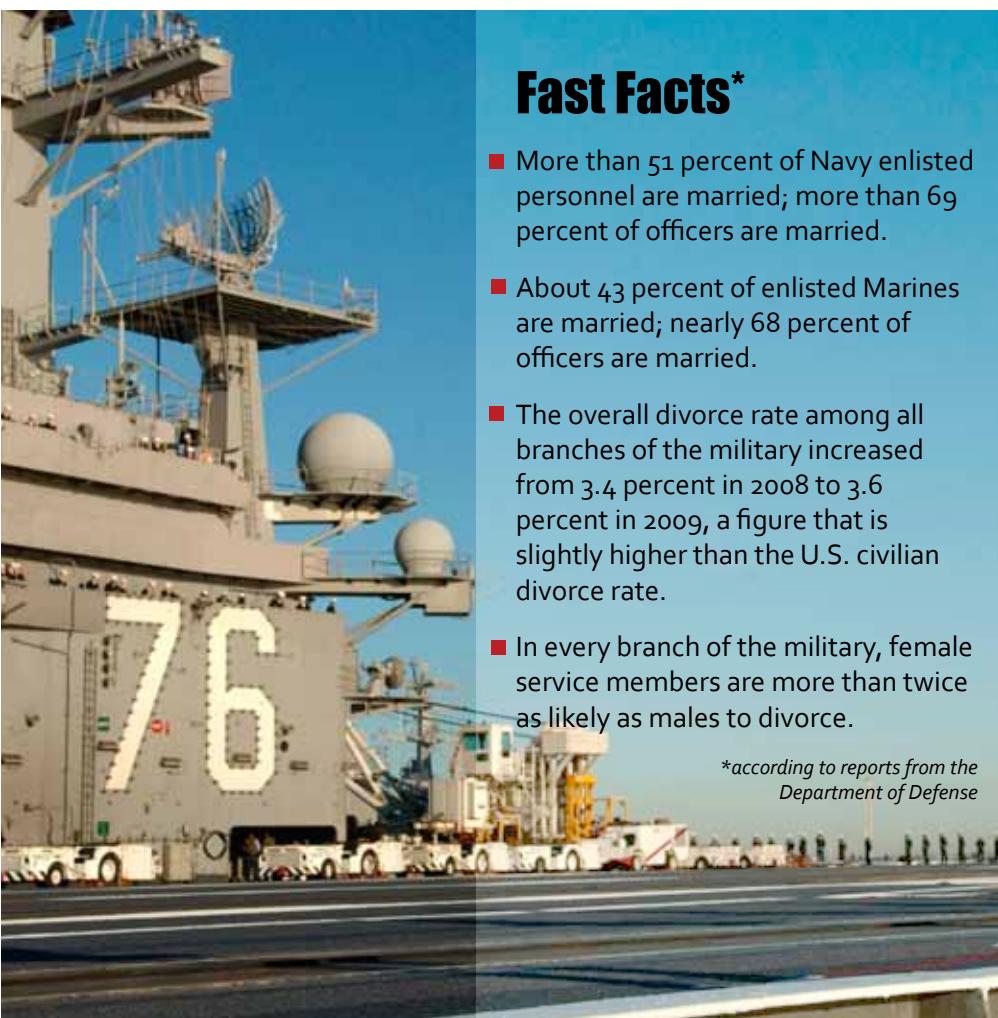
“If a leader sees a subordinate’s work performance dropping or other behavior that suggests something is going on, he or she needs to intervene,” Pickel says. “The leader needs to offer resources and map out a plan of action to suggest to the service member.”

Whether it’s through the Chaplain Corps, Fleet and Family Services or Marine Corps Community Services, a wealth of counseling opportunities is available to help individual service members and their families. What often is needed, Pickel says, is the vocal support of leaders for Sailors and Marines to use the resources. “It’s always important for the service member to know that the command cares,” he says. ■

Fast Facts*

- More than 51 percent of Navy enlisted personnel are married; more than 69 percent of officers are married.
- About 43 percent of enlisted Marines are married; nearly 68 percent of officers are married.
- The overall divorce rate among all branches of the military increased from 3.4 percent in 2008 to 3.6 percent in 2009, a figure that is slightly higher than the U.S. civilian divorce rate.
- In every branch of the military, female service members are more than twice as likely as males to divorce.

*according to reports from the Department of Defense



CHANGE...Dreaded or Desired?

Change is inevitable — except from a vending machine. --Robert C. Gallagher

You either welcome change or you avoid it. How you react is associated with how the change ultimately affects you.

It is normal to try to avoid change. But that often results in anger, anxiety, fear, sadness, lack of focus, loss of energy or denial. Individuals who expect and embrace change usually react with anticipation and increased interest, ultimately experiencing a healthy adaptation to the change.

Accepting change requires that people understand two basic realities—any change includes a loss, and any loss is an emotional experience. Buying a new house, for example, is generally seen as a positive thing to do. But it also involves a loss of familiar surroundings and neighbors.

"Many of the difficulties we have related to change come from our expectations that something specific should happen in a given situation," says Dr. Bart Jarvis, a clinical psychologist who oversees the programs department at Naval Center for Combat & Operational Stress Control. "When something else happens, we may feel powerless or helpless, which, in turn, often increases our desire to control situations."

But no matter how much control we think we have—no matter how much we plan and strategize—unexpected things will happen. It is this struggle between our desire to predict and control events and the reality of unanticipated change that can create significant stress.

Jarvis cites as an example newly trained warriors who, engaged in actual combat, usually are fully committed and enthusiastic about the mission. They typically feel good about the level of their training, the condition of their equipment, their leadership and their comrades. But in any combat scenario, there are always unanticipated events. Friends are hurt or worse. Equipment malfunctions. There are constant physical hardships, as well as isolation and sleep deprivation.

"A normal response is to want to gain more control of circumstances—to make events more predictable," Jarvis says. "This is not always possible, and sometimes events become even more out of control and less predictable."

It is more productive to focus on what you can control.

"Even basics like eating properly and resting when possible help to give a sense of control," says Jarvis. "So does talking with shipmates or fellow Marines or writing to family."

The more we accept and understand that change will happen, the less distress and shock we will experience when we encounter it.

"This does not mean we should not plan or have expectations," Jarvis says. "Those are important elements of daily living and progress in our lives. It is when our plans do not work out and our expectations are not met that we must endeavor to accept and adapt to the new circumstances."

Jarvis emphasizes that the process takes personal effort and time.

"Making concrete and achievable decisions helps in this process," he says. "It also is important to find a part of the changed situation where you can feel competent. That will help increase acceptance of the change and decrease the negative emotional reaction to it." ■



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